

Doo-Wop, Baseball and the LTBC

by Tom Genoni

It was the spring of 1953, when I was 9 years old, that I fell in love for the first time — with doo-wop music. It was the era of Perry Como, Patti Page and *Your Hit Parade*. Rock ‘n’ roll was on its way (though not yet here to stay)¹. I had recently discovered KWBR, broadcasting from nearby Oakland, CA. KWBR had begun broadcasting in 1947 to serve the African-American communities that relocated from the South to Oakland (and other West Coast cities) as part of the second phase of the Great Migration. But the music also swept me up, and (judging by the makeup of the audiences in televised doo-wop specials) lots of other white kids too. It was impossible not to be drawn in to doo-wop’s impossibly catchy melodies², amusingly nonsensical lyrics³, and beautiful harmonies⁴. It’s still my favorite music, and I have amassed a collection comprising upwards of 750(!) 45s. I’ll get them out and play them on my Harman Kardon stereo, purchased by my dad in 1959, if I’ve had a couple of drinks or am feeling especially sentimental and nostalgic (often the same thing). I spent many hours sitting at the kitchen table of our split-level house in Richmond, CA, doing homework and listening to music, often with my hand behind the radio serving as a human antenna in order to pick up the relatively weak KWBR signal. KWBR played black artists exclusively, but ironically I found out later that the founder, general manager and main DJ, Bouncin’ Bill Doubleday, was white — a sign of the times, I guess. As “white” stations began playing “black” music over the next decade, it was interesting to watch the rigid boundary between black and white in popular music soften, probably faster than it did in most other areas of society.

Another perhaps unexpected leader in desegregation was Major League Baseball, and the Brooklyn Dodgers led the way by signing Jackie Robinson in 1947 (possibly the last good thing the Dodgers ever did). By the time I started following baseball closely in 1953, a number of outstanding black players were in the major leagues. Unaware of the Negro leagues and the history of segregation in baseball, I assumed they had always been there — perhaps also a sign of the times. Over the next two or three decades, great black players were to become a truly dominant force in baseball. In 1953 the Braves moved from Boston to Milwaukee and, since there was no major league team west of St. Louis at the time, I adopted them as my team. The following year they brought up a rookie named Henry Aaron, who quickly became my favorite player — so I take *some* credit for the legendary, Hall of Fame career that followed. In 1958 there was a second “great migration” to the West Coast, when the hated Dodgers moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles and the Giants moved from New York to San Francisco. I finally had a hometown team! I fell in love for the second time, becoming a Giants fan for life. Too young to drive (and with no car anyway), and with a TV universe that was at best meager and at worst insipid (*My Little Margie*, anyone?), I turned to baseball and music for sustenance during my junior high

¹ *Rock and Roll Is Here To Stay*, Danny & the Juniors, ABC Records, 1958.

² *Gee*, the Crows, Rama Records, 1953.

³ *Sh-Boom*, the Chords, Cat Records, 1954; *Rama Lama Ding Dong*, the Edsels, Dub Records, 1958.

⁴ *In the Still of the Nite*, The Five Satins, Standord Records, 1956.

and high school years. I did make sure to catch *American Bandstand* every afternoon and, besides the music — every song, according to the teen dancers, had a “good beat” that you could “dance to” — I enjoyed watching the shifting romances (“Ooh, Justine’s dancing with Bob now?”). My occasional clumsy foray into the dating world⁵ told me that I wasn’t ready to fall in love for real — yet.

It was the spring of 1961, and I enrolled in the School of Engineering at UC Berkeley, poised to join the likes of Jack Weinberg and Mario Savio as a radical leftist of the Free Speech Movement. Had I indeed gone to Cal, I might, instead of working on this memoir, be composing a blog about Trump’s “dangerous” tax cuts while strolling along Nancy Pelosi Drive — situated oh-so-appropriately between Jack Kennedy Drive and Martin Luther King Drive — in Golden Gate Park. However, an 11th-hour appointment to The Military Academy at West Point came through, my life took a right turn, and the Army (and Air Force) took charge of my activities for the next 25 years. I recall being less than excited (an understatement) about the approaching holidays in that first year at West Point. As plebes, we would have to stay on post over the Christmas break, unlike our counterparts at Navy and Air Force who were allowed to go home and see their mommies⁶. We grunts were much tougher than those sissies, of course — we just cried on the phone with our families. At least, that’s what I did. But it turned out to be a stroke of good fortune for me (an even bigger understatement) as during the second week of the break I met my wife-to-be Sheila⁷. Hard to believe, but she was only 16 at the time — while I, on the other hand, was a mature and worldly 17⁸. That was the beginning of a wonderful relationship that has lasted 57 years thus far. Sheila is still my sweetheart⁹, and of course, my far better half.

It was the spring of 1962 (this opening will elicit groans from the LTBC members who have heard the story more than once, which is almost all of them; though I reserve the right to tell it each time we welcome a new member!) when William Faulkner paid a visit to West Point. My English instructor, Major Joe Fant, was a West Point classmate of Paul Summers, Faulkner’s son-in-law, and through this connection he helped arrange the two-day visit on April 19-20. Faulkner toured the Academy buildings and grounds, visited two English classes, and gave a reading from a working draft of his upcoming novel *The Reivers*, which was later honored, first with the Pulitzer Prize and second, by becoming an LTBC selection. Mine was one of his two classroom visits, and as I was — atypically — late that day, the only seat left was right up front next to the author. I remember nothing of the substance of the question and answer session, but something Faulkner said must have amused me because, in a widely circulated photograph of Faulkner that includes me and a couple of my classmates, I have a broad smile on my face. The photo appeared in the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and on the cover of the book *Faulkner at West Point*, edited by Major Fant and published in 1964. The book has been reprinted a couple of times, and if you just *have* to have one, I strongly suggest you get the first edition with my face gracing

⁵ *Gee, But I’m Lonesome*, Lee Andrews and the Dreamlovers, Parkway Records, 1963; *Tears on My Pillow*, Little Anthony and the Imperials, End Records, 1958.

⁶ *Dear Mother*, the Hurricanes, King Records, 1956.

⁷ *Sheila*, Tommy Roe, ABC Records, 1962 (*not really doo-wop, but I couldn’t leave it out*); *Pretty, Pretty Girl*, the Timetones, ATCO Records, 1961.

⁸ *I’m So Young*, the Students, Note Records, 1958.

⁹ *I’ll Be Forever Loving You*, the El Dorados, Vee-Jay Records, 1955.

the cover. It would make a great story if I could report that this brief brush with literary nobility instilled in me a love of literature and turned me into a devoted, lifelong reader, but that wasn't the case. In fact, it wasn't until I joined the LTBC that I began to read consistently, and I credit my book club membership with helping me to finally appreciate classic literature. It's never too late.

In the fall of that same year, the Giants reached the World Series in only their fifth season in San Francisco. But it was not to be: After tying the series 3-3, they ended up losing to the Yankees 1-0 in a nail-biter of a seventh game at Candlestick Park. Bobby Richardson snared Willie McCovey's potentially game-tying line drive, ending the game and stranding Matty Alou on third base. Through my heartbreak, I remember thinking naively that it would only be a couple of years before the Giants would return, this time to win it. But the baseball gods have minds of their own, and it turned out to be almost half a century before the Giants would win the Fall Classic, finally rewarding their loyal and long-suffering fans in 2010. Playing now with house money, San Francisco went on to win it again in 2012 and 2014. If I've done the math right, I shouldn't complain about losing for another 30 or 40 years (but of course I'm complaining already).

It was the spring of 1993, and Sheila and I were out to dinner when we ran across a friend of Sheila's from her book club and her husband John Beresky. During the course of a brief conversation, John floated the suggestion that we form a men's book club. I said sure, thinking that probably nothing would come of it. But John took the initiative, and within a couple of weeks he had organized and hosted the first meeting of what was to become the Last Thursday Book Club. Our first selection was Norman MacLean's beautiful and heartbreaking *A River Runs Through It*, a book which in my opinion warrants more than one reading; and in fact we did reread it several years later. (For the record: The rumor that we all forgot that we had read it already is not true. Given the average age of our members, however, you can be forgiven for believing it!)

There were four attendees at that inaugural meeting — John; Gary Ganong; Dan Herrick, a colleague of Gary's at the Air Force Weapons Laboratory; and me. Dan was primarily interested in non-fiction and so decided not to return. John left the club after a minor dust-up a few years later, and Gary subsequently moved to California. Let's see...I believe that makes me the lone remaining original club member. (Mike, you may be the MVP of the book club, but I still have seniority.)

At the second LTBC meeting, Gary (who went on to become our most prolific recruiter) brought along — you guessed it — Mike Blackledge, a friend of both Gary's and mine from our days together teaching at the Air Force Academy in the early 70s. Despite the cloud of not being a charter member, Mike quickly became — and remains today — the chief organizer, cheerleader and secretary of the club. (Thank you, Mike!)

I am also eternally grateful to ex-club member John Taylor for introducing us to the incomparable Vladimir Nabokov with his selection of *Glory*, an English translation of one of the nine novels Nabokov wrote in Russian before he and his family fled Europe for America in 1940. I soon began collecting and reading all of his other Russian works, as well as the eight novels he wrote in English during his years in the U.S. Besides *Glory*, the club has read *Invitation To a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister* and Nabokov's

masterpiece *Lolita*, the selection for our memorable road trip to the enchanting La Posada hotel in Winslow, AZ. No other author I have read can match Nabokov's extraordinary prose — smart, at times funny, at times moving, always beautiful. If I put together a ranking of all the books the club has read, *Lolita* would be at the very top.

The LTBC, a group of self-described “mildly mature males,” has been going strong now for 25 years. We are a men's book club — during a discussion of Lance Armstrong's memoir *It's Not About the Bike* in which we were marveling at his fight against both testicular and brain cancer, Mike mused, “Testicles and brains...without those we'd be just another women's book club!” But we do bring a broad range of life experiences to our discussions, with a membership that has included doctors, lawyers, academics, professional military, scientists, engineers and even a statistician. Although we have all entered that stage of life commonly referred to as “elderly,” we will forge bravely ahead — until perhaps that Thursday evening when a majority of our members gets lost on the way to our meeting.

Postscript: A final anecdote involving doo-wop, our illustrious club secretary and his lovely and charming wife, Bonnie:

Doo-wop died out near the end of the 50s, then experienced a brief revival in the early 60s, during which the terms “doo-wop” and “oldies” were first introduced¹⁰. Since then, the genre has been kept alive by occasional plays on “oldies” radio and by a small community of diehard fans and record collectors, of which I am one. I had never been a collector, but about 20 years ago I began with the intention of acquiring a few of my favorite old records. With the help of eBay — and a somewhat compulsive nature — “a few old records” has grown into the sizeable collection I have today. Mike and Bonnie were aware of this, and when they heard what they thought was an obscure doo-wop song on the radio, they decided to play a trick on yours truly. They concocted a little one-act skit in which Mike was to describe the song they heard and stump me as to the title and artist. Then Bonnie was supposed to jump in with the answer, surprising and impressing me with this bit of knowledge. When the time came for their little performance, Mike gave Bonnie the high sign and launched into a somewhat confused description of the song. I knew right away that it was *Daddy's Home*¹¹, answer song to *A Thousand Miles Away*¹² (who wouldn't know that?) but decided to feign ignorance and play along. It was now Bonnie's turn to chime in — but unfortunately, she completely forgot what she was supposed to say and instead dissolved into laughter, as did Mike and I. The whole episode was hilarious, one of many memorably funny moments we have been fortunate enough to spend with our dear friends the Blackledges.

¹⁰ *Play Those Oldies, Mr. DeeJay*, Anthony and the Sophomores, Mercury Records, 1963; *Those Oldies But Goodies*, Caesar and the Romans, Del-Fi Records, 1961; *Memories of Those Oldies But Goodies*, Little Caesar and the Romans, Del-Fi Records, 1961.

¹¹ *Shep and the Limelites*, Hull Records, 1958.

¹² *The Heartbeats*, Hull records, 1956.